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'New Pop' and the problem of unravelling cultural histories

Sara L Shepherd B.A. (Hons.)

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation was to examine changing discursive representations of 'New Pop', a British popular music phenomenon of the 1980s, and in doing so it explored the methodological issues related to the construction and interpretation of cultural histories. The study drew on literature which highlighted several issues as key in the representation of cultural phenomena; namely, the act of narrativisation (White 1987; Zerubavel 2003), the use of interpretative repertoires (Edley 2008), and the influence of collective memory (Halbwachs 1995). In order to evaluate the proposed shift in discursive constructions of 'New Pop', a comparative approach was adopted, with a selection of media accounts gathered both from the time of the phenomenon in question and from the subsequent period. In applying Critical Discourse Analysis to this material (Fairclough 1995), the study was able not only to identify the discursive strategies at work in representations of 'New Pop', but also to investigate the politics of the disparity which was found between contemporary and retrospective accounts. Emerging from the analysis were a number of findings concerning the role of discursive power in the privileging of particular accounts of 'New Pop', the problematic status of truth-claims in the representation of cultural phenomena, and the epistemological implications of the tendency to retrospectively codify cultural history.

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Chapter One: Aims and Objectives

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the discursive representation of cultural phenomena in the construction of cultural histories, and to investigate the related methodological issues. This subject will be explored using the case of 'New Pop', a particular articulation of British popular music that emerged in the immediate post-punk period, from around 1980 onwards.

In terms of more specific objectives, the dissertation will:

Firstly, evaluate the proposition that media accounts of New Pop have been discursively reconstructed and transformed over time, from the late 1970s to the present day. It will do so by analysing data gathered from chronologically distinct periods, i.e. material produced at the time of the phenomenon in question, and accounts produced retrospectively in the subsequent period.

Secondly, whilst focusing on the specific discourses that are invoked, the study will at the same time also interrogate the function of narratives in the representation of cultural history (White 1987; Zerubavel 2003) and more specifically within media texts which discuss the New Pop phenomenon. It will look to pinpoint the ways in which these may have evolved/diverged over time.

Thirdly, the study will investigate the ways in which the discursive framing of experience may be determined by different cultural and temporal contexts (Edley 2008), and will identify and assess the differences between contemporary and retrospective

representations of the New Pop phenomenon by artistes, music critics, and historians.

Fourthly, the study will explore the sense in which the framing of experience in the representation of pop history may be affected by the passage of time and shaped by the influence of collective memory (Halbwachs 1995).

Finally, using the above approaches, the study will evaluate the specific ways in which discursive representations of New Pop may have changed over time, and will discuss the political implications of such a shift.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In examining the potential disparity between contemporary and subsequent accounts of the British post-punk, and more specifically, 'New Pop' scene, it would be fruitful to look in detail at some of the issues surrounding the discursive construction and interpretation of cultural phenomena more generally. The ways in which we give shape to human experience, whether through the use of narratives, the appealing to collective cultural meanings, or via personal and shared memory, necessarily provoke questions concerning the nature of truth, and the politics of constructing and interpreting histories. In what follows, each point and its relevance to the present study will be explored in turn.

Firstly, if we proceed from the premise that language, rather than being a transparent carrier of 'facts', is in part instrumental in creating meaning and constituting the social world, how then as researchers do we address and attempt to interpret the use of narrative structures within historical accounts of cultural epochs, such as that of the British post-punk era? Are there epistemological problems inherent in the narrativisation of cultural histories, or is 'storying' perhaps a valuable resource in making sense of the human experience of lived time (Gergen 1991)? In examining the nature of narrative in the discursive construction of cultural phenomena, we might also look at its ideological implications. In tidying the 'loose ends' of history and ordering experience into storied structures, is there a tendency to select particular events which fit neatly into a desired representation of history, and to carefully omit those which do not? In studying the evolving discourse on the British post-punk period and more generally the ways in which pop history has been constructed, it might be useful to explore the political function of narrative.

Secondly, in examining the politics of the discursive construction of cultural

phenomena, it would be useful to acknowledge the sense in which the social/cultural context in which speakers are embedded to some extent determines what can and cannot be said. The field of discursive psychology suggests that when social actors communicate, they do so by drawing on available 'interpretative repertoires' (Edley 2008), that which we might describe as the repositories of cultural meaning in a given society. Thus, the production of histories may be influenced and perhaps even stymied by the dominant understandings of the socio-cultural context from which they emerge. It would be useful, in looking at discussions and representations of the British post-punk era, from contemporaneous accounts to more recent dialogue, to identify and examine the wider social and cultural discourses that would possibly inform what is said, why, and how it is expressed.

Thirdly, the implications of viewing and/or constructing cultural history through the prism of memory have also been debated, with on one hand the assertion that it is an indispensable resource in understanding events of the past, and on the other the suggestion that memories are necessarily mediated and are therefore unreliable as a way in which to access and illuminate history. The issue of collective cultural memory (Halbwachs 1995) is pertinent in looking at retrospective accounts of British post-punk pop and the ways in which the period has been variously mythologised over time. The related experience of nostalgia is also relevant here, with the epistemological implications of its influence perhaps crucial in assessing the discrepancies within accounts past and present of the same phenomenon.

Looking firstly at narrative, its relevance for the present study is in its wider socio-cultural context, as opposed to the structural examination of its internal dynamics. The focus here is on what narratives do, rather than how they are organised *per se*. For theorists

that look to explore the function of narrative in conveying human experience, its significance lies in the ways in which meaning-making is rarely a solo endeavour; as has been pointed out, the act of telling stories about the world involves drawing on existing ways of communicating meaning, and as such, narratives inevitably 'plunge us into a sociality' (Lawler 2008, p.37). Narrativisation here is viewed as a sense-making resource, and the impulse to give narrative shape to human experience seen as universal (Gergen 1991; Barthes 1977). The use of narrative in representing social phenomena can be seen as a valuable way in which we endow experience with cultural significance; it can also be seen as constitutive of that experience in and of itself (Bruner 1991). The narrative frames within which we locate experience are at the centre of an epistemological dilemma. Do the various narrative templates that we may appeal to in depicting the social world threaten to undo or subvert our relation to history, or is there, in fact, no available unmediated access to the past? The implications for examining and/or producing cultural histories are, then, perhaps worthy of investigation.

Although the universality of 'storying' experience appears to not be in question, the truth-value of narratives has been vigorously debated. For Ricoeur, the issue is seen through a phenomenological lens; in representing the social world, temporality itself is a problematic concept. In so much that we as humans do not experience time in the abstract terms of a clock or calendar, and we do not have an experiential relation to the past within the lived present, narratives constitute a 'transcultural form of necessity' (Ricoeur 1984, p.52). For Ricoeur, the 'human' time expressed through narratives is grounded in, and more accurately conveys, the impressionistic nature of lived experience. For the representing of history, there are, however, some important epistemological issues here in the ways in which narratives are structured and the forms in which they appear, with Ricoeur's concept of 'emplotment' being particularly relevant. In order to communicate

meaning effectively, narratives must be internally coherent, with a strong impression of chronological causation and effect, and a sense of inevitability in events. Crucially, perhaps, they must also have a *point* (Lawler 2008, p. 35). In terms of the forms that narratives typically take, histories tend to be ordered using what Zerubavel (2003, p. 13) calls 'sociomnemonic structures', for example, the classic 'rise and fall' narrative. We also, he points out, are inclined to establish chronological 'watersheds', retrospectively creating discrete historical periods, which, although serving to cohere past events and bestow meaning, are not directly indicative of lived experience.

In terms of the present study, I would suggest that this issue is particularly germane to the representation of pop history, which it would seem is especially prone to this artificial parcelling up of epochs for the purposes of a compelling narrative. Although, as has been suggested, narratives can give meaningful contours to flabby histories, there is a sense, for some, in which this coherence can give an *erroneous* sense of order to the messiness and contingency of human experience, one which obscures rather than illuminates. For theorists of narrative history such as Hayden White (1987) this coherence has no necessary correspondence with 'reality', and although we might acknowledge the problematic relation between reality and representation generally, and indeed recognise the important role of storying in human life, the rationale underpinning Ricoeur's epistemological privileging of narratives in representing the social world is a faulty one. For White, narratives are ultimately a construction.

This ostensibly constructed character of narrative has political implications in the representing of human experience. As has been pointed out, narratives must not only be internally coherent, but must also resonate with the social context from which they emerge and of which they are arguably an effect. That the coherence and wider cultural resonance of a narrative can perhaps serve as a normalising function and facilitate the transmission of

ideological messages has been highlighted. The demand for closure – an ‘inevitable’ ending - within the internal structure of a narrative is, for White, indicative of the fact that rather than serving to record past events in neutral and disinterested fashion, narratives invariably operate as the messengers of moral meaning (White 1987). If narratives necessarily bear the imprint of the sociocultural context from which they emerge, they also then can serve to reproduce its dominant cultural meanings; for Ewick and Sibley (1995), the fact that narratives inevitably chime with the collective cultural consciousness is demonstrative of their hegemonic potential. The coherence and ‘common sense’ nature of narratives, they suggest, can pre-empt alternative versions of events and thus serve to perpetuate dominant understandings of the world. In terms of interpreting pop music history, this is an interesting issue. It may be useful to examine the ways in which events have often been represented in storied or fabled form, and look at the narrativised interpretations that have been naturalised over time and have now perhaps passed into the realm of pop ‘gospel’. Moreover, we may want to ask where lies the power to construct history through narratives; as Negus reminds us, within narrativised accounts of pop history, ‘some dialogues are presented with specific beginnings and endings and seem to dominate particular periods of time; other dialogues seem strangely absent...’ (Negus 1996, p. 138). As useful and often compellingly vivid as narrative accounts can be in providing the illustrative details of history, in attempting to interpret the multiple versions of past events it is useful to bear in mind the caution that narratives are not necessarily ‘unsponsored texts’ (Bruner 1991, p. 10)

Having explored the function of narrative in the construction of cultural histories, I now turn to the significance of the particularities of language. The political and epistemological implications of interpreting discursively constructed histories are not only

evident in looking at the forms various accounts take, and the ways in which they are temporally and structurally organised; we might also want to explore the linguistic content of the narratives in question. Discursive psychology suggests that in everyday social interaction we draw upon 'interpretative repertoires' (Edley 2008) - pre-existing linguistic resources - and our utterances are informed by shared cultural understandings. In constructing accounts of the social world, we 'borrow' from a lexicon of terms provided for us by the culture in which we are embedded. As with those who recognise the inevitability of the use of narrative structures in discursively representing human experience, it has been suggested that in order to communicate meaning in a given social *milieu*, it is necessary to appeal to and utilise its store of common sense language (Potter and Wetherell 2001; Lawler 2008; Billig 1997). This is, however, not necessarily indicative of an unrestricted linguistic pick'n'mix. As Edley points out, when particular ways of understanding the world become culturally dominant, they can then impede access to other linguistic constructions, and overwrite alternative understandings and interpretations (Edley 2008, p. 190). In looking at the ways in which New Pop has been discussed and portrayed over time, it would be useful initially to identify the linguistic 'repertoires' that have been drawn on and the discourses that have circulated within constructions of pop history. I would suggest that in particular with an analysis of New Pop, its putative relation to the political culture of the early '80s warrants investigation, especially in terms of a potential disparity between contemporaneous and retrospective accounts and the possibility of this resulting from a divergence in respective stores of interpretative resources.

Finally, we turn to the issue of collective memory in the representation of experience. In acknowledging the contingency of discursively constructed histories, we are

reminded of the subjective nature of human experience; as such, our personal relation to past events necessarily passes through the filter of memory. As has been pointed out, memory is central to understanding human experience, 'not because it *is* the past, but because it is the modality of our relation to it' (Terdiman 1993, p. 8). Memory, as both a method of investigation and an object of study in its own right, has become a vital resource for cultural studies (Keightley 2008). The emphasis here is on the *social* nature of memory, of remembering as a cultural practice and the collective construction of memory via social rituals and representations; memory is seen here as a negotiation between self and society (Wang and Brockmeier 2002). Importantly for the present study, memory is seen as a sense-making resource, occupying a crucial role in endowing history with meaning. For the interpretation of histories, however, in recognising memory as both a representative and constructive medium it might be necessary to return to the dilemma of truth-value, particularly in terms of problematising the relationship between memory and the experience to which it refers.

For Halbwachs (1995:1926), pioneer in the study of 'collective memory', the act of remembering cannot be divorced from its socio-cultural context, and is at once informed by, and constitutive of, that context. Memory should not, therefore, be viewed as merely a straightforward individual recalling of past experience. The memories of an individual are here located at the 'intersection of collective influences' from the cultural environment (Halbwachs 1995, p. 44); the ways in which we remember are necessarily dictated by the norms of the social groups to which we belong and in which we participate, and the act of collective remembering functions as a continual reaffirmation and reconstruction of those norms. This conception of memory as cultural intersection corresponds with that which van Dijk (2004) defines as the 'historical' meaning of collective memory - the nebulous feeling of having been part of a communal past. The historical significance of collective

here is in the understanding of experience occupying a space between private acts of memory and public constructions of the past; individual and collective memory exist in a dialectical relationship, constantly informing and reconstructing the other. In examining accounts of cultural histories, this is a key point. As representations of the past pass in common consciousness and particular versions of events gain currency, it may be that we compare, reconstruct and perhaps transform our own remembered experience against that of the testimonies of others. Cultural histories supported by collective memory are inherently fluid and organic, and, as such, their constantly shifting meanings must then be taken into account and contextualised.

In analysing accounts of a past pop culture, the issue of negotiating mediated memories is brought into sharp focus. For some, this is not necessarily the epistemological quagmire it might seem. Lipsitz (1990) writes of the potential for cultural memory to be creatively articulated, and indeed interpreted, through the use of mediated texts. In the age of mass media, he argues, popular culture and collective memory are mutually dependent; the former is the arena in which we inevitably construct the latter, and there is the possibility here of critically engaging with history through the prism of popular cultural memory. Conversely, there are theorists such as Fredric Jameson (1991) who point to the cultural amnesia of contemporary culture, arguing that in the postmodern privileging of surface over substance, the act of remembering is stifled and curtailed, and historicity becomes impossible. Related to this is the issue of nostalgia in the construction and interpretation of cultural history. We might posit the phenomenon of nostalgia as the errant cousin of collective memory; one which is individually experienced but socially negotiated and perpetuated – and one which represents a potential issue in terms of unravelling historical narratives. As Jameson argues, the influence of nostalgia means that we may prioritise positive accounts of the past and construct a romantic and perhaps blinkered

version of history (Jameson 1991, p. 281). Other theorists are more sanguine about the effect of nostalgia on the construction and interpretation of the past. Pickering and Keightley (2006) suggest that in recognising the complex nature of nostalgia, rather than creating a false dichotomy between historical reality and mediated representation, we can illuminate the past, and more importantly, our human relation to it. Nostalgia, they argue, is an integral part of the way in which we critically and creatively navigate our collective relation to history; the epistemological privileging of what we might believe to be 'historical objectivity' perhaps fails to take this into account.

I would suggest that this issue is highly relevant in the analysis of evolving accounts of a period in popular music, especially in the study of an era – the 1980s – which is currently the specific focus of what we might term the nostalgia industry, with a proliferation of oral accounts, pop culture texts (records, films, TV programmes), and club nights, all referencing and mythologizing the decade. In acknowledging both the assertion that the influence of collective memory and nostalgia may limit or impede our understanding of the events of the past, and the suggestion that it is an unavoidable yet often useful phenomenon in understanding and constructing the past, it is possible not only to make sense of history but to also to explore the act of sense-making itself.

The methodological issues surrounding the representation and interpretation of discursive history, whether in terms of i) the use of narratives, ii) employment of interpretative repertoires, or iii) invoking of collective memory, are numerous, and clearly need to be borne in mind in attempting the analysis of an evolving discussion of a specific cultural experience. In some ways, the problems inherent in interpreting historical accounts are even more acute in the specific area of popular music, within which, as Kelly points out, history, myth and narrative are 'inescapably intertwined' (Kelly 1999, p. 232). I would

suggest, however, echoing some of the material presented above, that these mythologised constructions are not only valuable as objects of study *per se*, but also in terms of affording critical insight into the representation of past events. As Toynbee (1993, p. 298) points out, music journalism is, in itself, more than a mere 'empirical window onto a state of pop reality beyond'. It forms part of a cultural practice central to the experience of popular music - namely, reading and talking about it.

Chapter Three: Methods of data collection and analysis

Data Collection

The research question largely determines the type of data that must be collected; this is an analysis of the discursive construction of a cultural history largely through media texts.

A selection of texts has been gathered primarily from the years 1978-1986 and from 1990 to the present. Use has been made of available archival evidence from the British music press, utilising both the British Library collection, and various internet resources, including the popular music writing online archive *Rock's Back Pages*¹. Material contained in several books documenting the era, both contemporaneous to 'New Pop' and from more recent times, has also been examined.

In order to illuminate the issue of the construction and interpretation of cultural histories I aim to produce a qualitative analysis of a particular cultural phenomenon – 'New Pop' - by tracing its outline and evolution through media texts. As such, it has been necessary to identify and handpick appropriate or typical cases. The texts (which have included interviews, record reviews, and general articles or 'think pieces') have therefore been selected on the basis of their suitability to the research question, using a non-random method based on time period and representativeness, i.e. the sampling strategy has been purposive. I have confined the selection to those which make specific reference to 'New Pop' as a phenomenon (I expect to find this term in the case of recent texts), or those which more generally invoke the notion of a New Pop by alluding to a 'new start', or return to 'pop', after the punk period (generally expected in the case of texts contemporaneous to the phenomenon in question). Internet searches have involved various

¹ *Rock's Back Pages* does not paginate the articles it reproduces online, therefore in any material in the analysis taken from this resource, page numbers are not provided.

permutations of these terms and concepts in order that pertinent material can be located.

In order to investigate the proposition that media discourse on New Pop has evolved over time, a comparative approach has been adopted. I have examined texts both from around the time of the phenomenon and retrospective accounts from recent years. The starting point for the analysis is the first documented use of the term 'New Pop' in 1978, though the bulk of journalistic material has been collected from the subsequent period from 1980 to 1983 - this particular time period has been chosen with the aid of prior knowledge of the general timescale of the phenomenon in question. Two days were spent at the British Library periodicals branch at Colindale, in order to access their comprehensive archive of the now-defunct fortnightly pop magazine, *Smash Hits*, which is unavailable to peruse as a full set elsewhere. All full-length articles between the years 1980-1983 were examined - this involved typically 2-3 per edition - and data selected on the basis of the search terms already detailed. As *Smash Hits* was the main magazine at this time to deal predominantly with chart music, it was considered crucial to the present study in providing an insight into the various discursive representations of the chart-led New Pop phenomenon. An equivalent search on the online music journalism resource, *Rock's Back Pages*, has yielded results from a range of other British music publications from the time, including *NME*, *Melody Maker*, *Sounds*, *Record Mirror*, and *The Face*. *Rock's Back Pages* was deemed appropriate as a search tool for British music press material, as it has archived the vast majority of major articles from the relevant time period. The sample has been widened out to 1986 in order to include the books *Like Punk Never Happened* and *Ask: the Chatter of Pop*, both of which attempt to evaluate and codify the New Pop phenomenon in what was viewed as its immediate aftermath, and can be seen as valuable as such.

Likewise, data collection of retrospective accounts of New Pop has been expanded to include material from around 1990, the point at which the popular culture of the

preceding decade began to be retrospectively appraised. In recent years there has, however, been a proliferation of articles, interviews and TV programmes concerning the post-punk period in British pop, emerging partly in response to Simon Reynolds' 2005 account of the era, *Rip it Up and Start Again*, and it has therefore been the case that the vast majority of the retrospective material has been gathered from this subsequent period. Google searches for recent material on New Pop have provided data from a range of sources, including articles from the music sections of *The Guardian* and *The Observer* online archives, and writings from various contemporary popular music websites and blogs. The collecting of online material is important in identifying more recent discourse on New Pop, as in terms of pop music journalism the terrain has shifted considerably over the course of the last decade, with sales of traditional music papers in decline and the online sphere now predominating.

Analysis

The literature review identifies a number of issues in the interpretation of cultural histories, and the research design aims to address these. The issues largely concern the uses of language, both in form and content, in transmitting human experience, whether through the employment of narratives, the drawing on of existing linguistic repertoires, or by way of the evoking of collective memory. As such, they would suggest linguistically-informed methodologies; interestingly, all of the thematic discussions also function as analytical approaches. Given the prominence here of the issue of narrativisation in discursive representations, the use of narrative analysis, discussed by Gillespie (2006) as useful in understanding the circulation of cultural meanings, has been considered as an appropriate form of analysis to apply. However, the study not only aims to identify narratives and

dominant discourses, but is also concerned more specifically with exploring the nuances and *effects* of language. It has therefore been decided that it would be productive to employ a Critical Discourse Analysis approach, examining the selected texts as ‘discursive events’; dealing with them both in terms of their linguistic and discursive functions, and the wider socio-cultural context in which they and their producers are embedded (Fairclough 1995).

In setting up a comparison of two sets of textual data, referring to the same phenomenon but in the main more than two decades apart, the study aims to assess the proposition that the discursive representation of experience is socially or culturally determined. The use of Critical Discourse Analysis, with its concern with the ways in which language is involved in social processes, will enable the study to relate the textual to the socio-cultural. Analysis will proceed from a framework suggested by van Dijk (1993) which includes; setting, genre, communication and social meaning within the text, positions and roles of the actors/ participants, speech acts, topics and meaning and power relations.

The aim of this dissertation is not only to investigate a possible disparity in the ways in which New Pop is discussed in the successive periods, but also to examine the politics of any identified discursive shift. In examining representations of a cultural phenomenon, we are not concerned with excavating the ‘truth’ as such; the focus here is on identifying and interpreting the various discursive strategies involved in those constructions. Critical Discourse Analysis as a methodology is therefore appropriate here, as it aims to explore and expose the ways in which language is involved in relations of power and ideology; as such, it focuses on the effects of texts rather than questions of truth (Fairclough 1995).

As the study examines discursive representations, from chronologically distinct periods, of the same cultural moment, it is partly concerned with the transformation of

discourse over time. There is a sense here in which the texts in question are not only determined by their socio-cultural context, but are also constitutive of it. As has been pointed out, Critical Discourse Analysis is useful in attending to the historicity of discursive events, as it aims to show both their continuity with the past, with existing orders of discourse, and their involvement in constructing history, in remaking orders of discourse (Fairclough 1995, p.11). In comparing representations from the two time periods in question, this notion of discursive transformation will be invoked and drawn upon.

Ethics

At every step of this dissertation, care has been taken where applicable to ensure adherence to the Open University Ethical Code of Practice. The possibility for harm is minimal in this study, as it entails the use of archival material and does not involve human participants at any point. There is, likewise, no issue here with confidentiality, as the analysis is confined to published materials only. There are, however, several ethical issues which are pertinent to the present study. The first concerns the responsibility on the part of researchers to conduct work which, in meeting rigorous standards throughout the research process, supports and enhances the reputation of the institution in which it is carried out. This includes an attention to accuracy in both the collecting and reporting of data, and all efforts have been made during the present study to ensure that this is the case. Source materials have been scrupulously acknowledged throughout the work, and referenced using the guidelines set out by the American Psychological Association. The second issue, highlighted by the O.U. Code of Practice, concerns the need to maintain high levels of integrity in carrying out research. As such, in assessing and critiquing the works of others, the present study has been careful not to employ *ad hominem* arguments or use intemperate

language. Thirdly, the analysis has been conducted with an awareness of the responsibility upon researchers to handle data in a reasonable way. As Oliver (2003, p.136) points out, balance and objectivity are crucial in reporting results of research and drawing conclusions, and care has been taken in the study to ensure that any findings presented do not exceed the reasonable limitations of the data. Fourthly, as Blaxter (2006, p.161) discusses, the researcher's 'values, position and notions of truth' are integral to ethical concerns. As such, in looking at discursive constructions of culture, the study proceeds from an understanding of the provisional and contested nature of truth and meaning in social phenomena, and a recognition of the need to acknowledge this throughout the research process; it also recognises the importance of maintaining a position of reflexivity in relation to the research project. Lastly, the issue of power relations in research has been highlighted (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), particularly the potential for research to reinforce existing power structures of society, in terms of, for example, its use of language or methodological framework. The present study recognises this possibility and looks to actively overcome it. The dissertation aims, in fact, through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis, to draw attention to and explore questions of power in the construction of cultural histories.

Chapter Four: Analysis

Introduction

This is an analysis of discursive representations of the British popular music phenomenon known as 'New Pop' from two distinct periods; writings at the time of the phenomenon in question, and accounts produced retrospectively. As with the terms 'New Wave' and 'Post-Punk' and 'New Romantic', there is perhaps some confusion about the various uses and applications – and indeed definitions - of the term 'New Pop'². However, this is an attempt to shed light on the issues surrounding the construction of cultural histories, through an analysis of discursive representations of a specific cultural phenomenon, and will therefore not look to provide any kind of taxonomic account of post-punk pop. Analytical attention will be focused on the 'texture of the text', with both content and form examined, and connotative meanings identified. The aim here is to establish not only the 'what' of discursive representations, but also the 'how' and 'why'; relating 'social events' (texts) to 'social practices' (orders of discourse) (Fairclough 2005).

The analysis looks firstly at the corpus of data gathered from between the years 1978-1986, identified using the rationale set in out in the previous chapter; namely, texts which make specific reference to the term 'New Pop', and texts which refer or allude to a return to pop or new start after punk. We then move on in the next section to examine the more recent histories of New Pop. In the initial stage of analysis three key themes were identified: aesthetics, politics and philosophy. Firstly, in examining the theme of 'aesthetics', the analysis looks at discussion of the musical form itself. Secondly, in exploring political themes, the study considers not only discussion of the internal politics of pop during the period in question (its relationship with the record industry, for example),

² A glossary of these popular music terms and others referred to in the analysis is provided in the appendix21

but also of its general political outlook. Lastly, in looking at the theme of 'philosophy', the analysis will examine discussion of New Pop's extra-musical concerns, and its wider cultural significance outside of the popular music sphere. The themes traverse the two sets of data, and in using them as a comparative framework for analysis, the study is afforded the ability to explore the proposed discursive shift in representations of New Pop. In what follows, then, these themes are discussed sequentially for each period; at the time of the phenomenon in question, and in the time period subsequent to it.

Contemporary Discourse

Aesthetics

To begin, the analysis focuses on discursive representations of art in the period that saw the emergence of what came to be known as 'New Pop'. In recent years writing about British popular music in the period from 1980 onwards has suggested that the so-called New Pop was a highly reflexive aesthetic movement that self-consciously separated itself from the preceding moment of punk (Harvell 2005). However, the data suggests that the mood within certain sections of the British music press was shifting perceptibly towards a 'return to pop' during the second wave of punk (or 'post-punk', as it is in the present day commonly known, and as it will from this point on be referred to in the study). Both the little-referred to 1978 article by Paul Morley, 'New Pop UK' - containing the first documented use of the term - and a *Sounds* article in the same year promoting what it refers to as 'Power Pop' (de Whalley, *Sounds*, 11 Feb 1978) as the way forward, urge a return to the aesthetic values of pop (immediacy, economy of style and presentation, commercial appeal), ostensibly in order that the 'achievements' of punk are not in vain and

can continue to take popular music in the 'right' direction away from the pre-punk Progressive Rock of the 'moping mighty monoliths like Floyd, Bad Company, Led Zep.' (Morley 1978 reprinted in Heylin 1992, p.204).

Within the time period in question, it appears that a shift had occurred in terms of the 'interpretative repertoires' that are drawn upon. A common theme in the data concerns a deliberate return after the punk era to a sophisticated and crafted pop, with an emphasis on 'well-made' records. This is evident in interviews even with artistes not conventionally associated with New Pop, although interestingly it is also a key theme in a 1980 *Smash Hits* interview (Feb 7-20) with The Buggles' Trevor Horn, who in two years later producing ABC's *The Lexicon of Love* would be one of the prime architects of what became the New Pop sound. Although we find in the data a notable and almost perhaps self-conscious lack of direct reference to the term 'punk' itself, there is plenty of implicit commentary on moving away from the basic sound or DIY aesthetic of punk. Some of this discussion takes the form of thinly-veiled criticism of punk's aesthetic values; for example, in an edition of *Smash Hits* from 1980, Trevor Horn speaks of his feeling that it 'was time' for a return to well-produced records, and time to reject 'all those poor recordings, the banal songs, Babylon's Burning, yeah, yeah, yeah', with elsewhere in the same issue Sting asserting that 'we've had enough of Borstal Breakouts' (Feb 7-20 1980).

Many comments from artists who would go on to be termed 'New Pop' often offer only an oblique rejection of punk production, invoking such concepts as 'quality' and 'gloss' in describing their desired production values. Similarly, another common theme which appears to take a shift away from the punk aesthetic as a starting point centres on the virtues of 'good', melodic songwriting; as Scritti Politti's Green Gartside puts it in 1982, 'classy and solid' (*Jamming* 1982, n.d.). The 'songs' are themselves here depicted as

paramount, which, in serving to distance itself from punk, also harks back to what had come to be seen as a pre-punk rock cliché, that it was 'all about the music'. There is also a sense in which this return to an emphasis on the pop aesthetic embodied in 'tunes' and 'hooks' is represented as a democratising force, something approaching light relief for the masses after all the primitive aural disorder of punk and formal experimentalism of post-punk. This is particularly evident in the teen-marketed *Smash Hits* magazine, and perhaps serves to highlight a discursive differentiation across periodicals with varying types of readership. In a 1981 interview with the group Bow Wow Wow, the journalist Mark Ellen, implicitly making reference to some sections of the 'heavyweight' UK music press, argues that 'writers, fighting a rearguard action for their own nostalgia about punk, haven't latched onto a return of public taste towards sharp, well-made records', with their guitarist later pointing out that 'everyone loves good melodies' (Aug 20-Sept 2 1981). This populist strand of thought in the 'pop' press, of moving away from punk and 'giving the people what they want', is in contrast with discussion in the 'serious' weeklies (particularly the *NME*) of a return to a pop ethic as a necessary post-punk move in order to fulfil punk's initial promise, sustain its relevance, and avoid the 'selfish, passive, isolated dead end' in which, for some, rock had previously ended up (Morley 1978, reprinted in Heylin 1992, p.199).

As with the discourse concerning a return to the crafted and sophisticated pop record, the emergence of a dialogue in the UK music press around an apparent shift in tone in British pop music, specifically as a reaction to what was seen as the 'arty' or elitist sensibilities of post-punk, is revealed from early on in the data. This shift is manifested in several distinct types of 'discursive strategy' (Fairclough 1995) on the part of both artistes and critics. In 1980, Adam Ant is heard criticising his own post-punk work as 'esoteric and

far too arty for anyone's good' (*Smash Hits*, Jun 11-24 1981). Not only an embracing of triviality, disposability and immediacy in pop but an asserted belief that this is in fact pop's essence, can be seen from both journalists and artists, as exemplified in the claim of Bow Wow Wow's guitarist that 'music ain't so important, it's throwaway really.' (*The Face*, Oct 1980) This claim is coupled with a rejection of the perceived pretentiousness or preciousness of post-punk. The ongoing critique of post-punk, on one hand, involves the explicit naming of names, though when that occurs - 'your Devos, Pere Ubus, the Pop Group or whoever' (de Whalley, *Sounds*, 11 Feb 1978) - there is clearly an implicit assumption being made as to what these names connote; they are functioning as shorthand for a specific aesthetic outlook. On the other hand, in some sections of the music press the espousal of pop values through a rejection of post-punk earnestness is far more arch and knowing. In 1980, in what has come to be seen as the 'New Pop' manifesto, Paul Morley weaves his own commentary into an interview with three up-and-coming bands, and writes of their desire to 'exorcise the wailing Pop Group ghost' (*NME*, 20 Dec 1980). Although the Bristol group of that name, and post-punk itself, are not specifically discussed, the agenda of identifying the enemy and moving on is clearly set here. Elsewhere the dismissal of post-punk 'artiness' is seen to take the form of self-conscious apologia on the part of artists. In 1982, Green Gartside is heard rejecting the 'de-constructuralist twanging and banging' of the post-punk incarnation of Scritti Politti, in favour of the 'nice, very simple, very lovely tunes' of what was at that point his recent and very deliberate move to 'pop' (*Melody Maker*, 29 May 1982).

Later on, Paul Morley (1986, p. 125) appraises and condemns what had eventually 'become' of the New Pop aesthetic in terms of a 'decline narrative' - 'somehow Gilbert O'Sullivan and Squeeze have been bigger influences in new pop than Buzzcocks and Pere Ubu', before going on to say that the pop of the mid-'80s had become 'the agreeable rather

than the transforming, Bart and not Brecht.' This perhaps highlights a problem in pinning down the artistic ethos of an era or phenomenon; one influential writer's conception of what would ideally constitute 'intelligent' pop is not necessarily indicative of the more general popular outlook. Moreover, the political function of narrative, as discussed by Ewick and Sibley (1995) is perhaps pertinent here. In presenting 'storied' accounts of history, they argue, we often conceal the social organisation of their production, and can ultimately stifle the circulation of alternative accounts.

Politics

Moving away from discussion of the aesthetic to that of the political, we observe a theme in the data that suggests a turning away from conventional politics in general, and a notion that popular music is not an appropriate medium through which to express political ideas. This is evident in both the invocation of specific discourses and the employment of particular forms of language. As with the previous point about a rejection of art sensibilities by artistes at this time, the renouncing of pop politicking in this period very much takes the form of implicit critique of the successive waves of punk in previous years. The terms pertaining to politically-oriented music, found throughout the data, are largely negative in their association, and can be seen as thinly-veiled references to the previous music culture. These include the characterisation of the promotion of political causes through pop as 'preaching', of pop forms informed by radical ideas as 'conscientious', and of music which eschews the logic of commerce in favour of individual or radical expression as 'puritan' (as seen, for example, in the following articles: Salewicz 1981; de Graaf 1981; Ellen 1981).

We also begin to see the idea emerge that politics are the personal concern of the

individual and as such should not be discussed in the public arena. This is highlighted by a 1981 *Smash Hits* interview with Duran Duran, in which they insist that they are not apolitical, but that they believe that political proselytising turns 'the people' off both pop and politics (Mar 5-8 1981). Around the same time, we see Spandau Ballet's insistence that punk never was 'supposed' to be political, and their assertion that the radical turn it later took was in fact a subversion of what they saw as punk's original gospel of individualism (*Sounds*, 13 Sep 1980). This statement reveals the problematic relationship between New Pop and its supposed cultural ancestor, punk. It is what came to be theorised as the punk 'schism' - conflicting ideas at this time about what ideally would constitute a radical art - writ large (i.e. agit-prop versus radicalisation of the art form itself).

Explicit references to politics in the data, however, fade with time, and they appear to evolve into a narrower dialogue about the politics of pop itself, although there are numerous examples to suggest that this is in part an outcome of the themes that the journalists themselves are presenting and prioritising. Dominant themes in this period appear to centre on the dissolution of the art/commerce binary in pop, which had been symbolically laid to rest by punk's exposing and parodying of the machinations of the music business. Consequently perhaps, in the period in question, the discourse partly revolves around the idea of ensuring that this hitherto problematic relation is kept at bay; as such, unashamed commercialism is presented as democratic and desirable. Aspiration and ambition is a dominant theme, with any kind of celebration of making art for its own sake denigrated as deluded. As Adam Ant, erstwhile member of several failed punk acts, states, 'It may be very romantic having cult status - but cult is really just a kind of word for loser' (*The Face*, April 1981). Unadulterated economic achievement is posited as pop's aim here, as in Postcard Records label owner Alan Horne's belief that 'music should always aim for the widest possible market. The charts are there' (*NME*, 4 Oct 1980). As

with many of the themes already explored in the analysis, the references to punk in the data are not generally overt, though a coded message from New Pop artists can perhaps be deciphered as a desire to avoid the pitfalls that punk acts fell prey to, particularly in terms of their failure to make money. The music press can be seen to pick up on this discourse on the part of pop acts, and parody it in choice and presentation of language, particularly *Smash Hits*, with its characteristically tart commentary, for example, with part of a review reading 'ABC look set to Do Very Well in '82' (Mar 4-17 1982).

Appraisals of New Pop from its tail-end read like a caricature of their object. *Smash Hits* journalist Dave Rimmer, in his 1985 book on Culture Club, *Like Punk Never Happened* - a seemingly sanguine account of New Pop's pragmatic rejection of the ideals of punk - himself adopts the unashamedly mercenary tone of some New Pop artists. In his introduction to the book, he tells us, 'and I hope to make some money too...' (p.5); elsewhere in the book he employs the vernacular of London 'barra boys' - 'by that time he or she should have made their pile and be ready to jack it all in' (p. 148). It is difficult to precisely gauge the levels of irony in the book, though we might confidently assume here that the book is, in discursive terms, deliberately positioned midway - celebratory in part, in order to appeal to young fans, but on a different level perhaps pitched as critical exercise, and a more arch and incisive statement on the condition of pop in the mid 1980s. In this sense it is indicative of much of the data collected from *Smash Hits*, in that it displays a kind of double-voicedness (Bakhtin, cited in Gergen 1991), using ironic language in order to perhaps transmit incisive comment.

There is also a discernible emphasis in the data on the virtues of professionalism and career-mindedness, which chimes very strongly with the subsequently much perpetuated narrative of 'complete control' in pop after the supposed exploitation of punk acts (particularly the Sex Pistols). Though punk is rarely explicitly referred to in data, the

work ethos of pre-punk Glam artistes is invoked as the benchmark. Adam Ant tells *Smash Hits* in 1980 of his belief that acts such as Roxy Music and T Rex struck him as 'really knowing what they were trying to do' (Oct 30-Nov 12 1980). Elsewhere, artists are heard couching their position in terms such as the desire to radiate 'respectability', 'conduct themselves properly', and provide 'choice' and 'value for money' (as seen, for example, in the following articles: Birch 1981b; Morley 1980). The prevailing themes around professionalism in pop are perhaps neatly encapsulated in the language, imagery and ideas of the British Electric Foundation (B.E.F.), who, following on from Public Image Limited (John Lydon's post-Sex Pistols project), put forward the notion of a pop group as a corporation, complete with 'managing directors', with the ostensible aim of enabling artists to retain control and freedom over their 'product' (*Smash Hits*, Sep 17-30 1981). The discourse of business, the data suggests, permeated British pop at this time, and seemed to have been a defining feature in the ideas of groups who positioned themselves as part of a New Pop wave after punk. For example, in a Haircut One Hundred interview (*NME*, 13 Mar 1982), their percussionist pointedly rejects the small ambition of punk, but justifies his position using corporate parlance: 'I wouldn't have given up an £8,000 a year job just to twat around in a little no future pop group. I left because the *flexibility* and *potential* of Haircut's music really interests me' (my italics). As Billig points out, in order to communicate we must draw on terms which are culturally, historically and ideologically available (Billig 1997, p. 217). It seems clear that the discourse of New Pop both reflected and signalled a shift in the construction and representation of authenticity within popular music, with the Romantic myth of the dignity of the starving artist perhaps temporarily laid back to rest.

Having examined discursive constructions of 'New Pop' in terms of aesthetic and political ideas, I will now explore representations of the broad philosophy underpinning the phenomenon. Within the previously discussed discourse of rejecting overt political expression in pop, there is also a sense in which it is tied in with a desire to restore pop to its rightful place within the social world, as inoffensive backdrop to everyday life, and more specifically, as *entertainment*. There are several suggestions throughout the data that allude to the idea that there is a specific 'need' for entertainment in a period of 'gloom' (found in articles by Taylor 1980; Ellen 1981) – though it is not clear as to whether this refers to socio-political matters of the time or to the previously prevailing mood of post-punk. There is also, at this time, an emphasis on the importance of showbiz values and good old-fashioned glamour. Again, much in the way of promoting the 'flamboyance' of New Pop is presented as an antidote to the previously dominant music culture, drawing attention to its supposed 'drabness' and 'grimness' without making direct reference. This is nicely exemplified by a Bow Wow Wow quote from the then-new style journal *The Face* in October 1980: 'Everything's got so grey and depressing. All that depressing music about. We're the only colourful thing around'. As with discussion about a return to pop, the data suggests that ideas around the importance of fun and enjoyment in performing in were also in the air generally in the music press from the period immediately after punk, and more often than not it is as opposed to austerity of post-punk, as with this statement from The Skids' Richard Jobson in 1980 – 'after three years of mundanity, the kids deserve a bit of glamour' (*Smash Hits*, Sept 18-Oct 1 1980). There is a sense here in which pop music history is storied during the moment in which it is unfolding, with a purported shift in sensibility presented as an inevitable occurrence. As Lawler (2008) argues, this

projection of inevitability is an integral element in the production of effective narratives.

A continually recurring discourse in the data centres on the desire for newness, healthiness and change. For example, in a *Smash Hits* article in 1980 (May 25-28), the one-time punk writer Tony Parsons writes of the 'healthy' and 'fresh' state of the charts at that point, and Paul Morley's 1978 piece on the emergence of a New Pop posits 'change' as the lifeblood of punk. The impression created here is partly one of a need to embrace continual transformation in pop in order that the 'Year Zero' credo of punk is to survive and thrive. There is a sense in which the almost obsessional optimism and emphasis on moving forward which began to dominate pop discourse at the time is seen not only as crucial in preserving punk spirit, but also as an essential mechanism of popular music itself more generally. The discursive representations found in the data suggest that at this time there existed what we might describe as approaching a fetishism of the 'new', and an aestheticisation of the concept of change. This is acutely exemplified in an interview conducted by Paul Morley with ABC in 1980 (*NME*, 20 Dec), which has come to be seen as the New Pop 'manifesto'. In this piece, the 'new optimism' emerging in pop is presented by the group as involving 'change as stability, change as strength. Ours is a doctrine of perpetual development'; a statement of intent which, it could be argued, reads very much like Marinetti's quasi-Fascist Futurist manifesto.

On further examination of the data, however, there are alternative or dissenting voices to be heard within the dominant discourse of undiluted post-punk pop optimism at this time. Most notably is that of Jon Savage, with what could be viewed as the first critique of New Pop in 1981. For Savage, the philosophical foundations of New Pop are to be found wanting, and any idea of 'change' as a radical gesture is an illusion. This commentary, presented as a 'betrayal narrative', focuses very much on what it believes to be a sell-out of the punk ethic; that contrary to popular conviction at the time, the lessons

of punk had not been learned. That which some of his contemporaries were championing as a radical pop transformation of punk was for Savage nothing new, and was in fact merely punk wearing updated outfits but shorn of its negationist impulse – observing the crowd at the Blitz club in London, he writes, ‘they remind me of the kids at the Roxy, except that the sneers are swapped for pout, the bondage pants for culottes, messing up for dressing up.’ New Pop’s connection to the New Romantic ‘Style Culture’ of the period, famously chronicled by media commentator Peter York (1988), seems to have been, for some, indication of a burgeoning conservatism. As for New Pop’s breezy idealism, Savage is similarly unimpressed; to his fellow writers at that point consumed by the idea of change and the notion that pop will inevitably progress and ‘get better’, he advises, ‘A word in your ear gentlemen: you’re faking the orgasm – it won’t.’ (*The Face*, Apr 1981). The conflicting accounts of the same phenomenon found here are perhaps illustrative of the notion of narratives as occupying the terrain on which ‘contradictory implications are struggled over’ (Brockmeier 2002, p. 35)

Later on, even those writers initially buoyed by what they saw as a fresh New Pop sweep begin to draw back from the optimism and attempt to construct and present a ‘decline narrative’. Paul Morley’s disenchantment can be witnessed in caustic commentary made within an interview he conducts with Haircut One Hundred in 1982 – ‘Cleancut 100 are being comfortably contained as the beaming babies of the new pop boom: scrubbed and innocuous’ (*NME*, 13 Mar 1982). Although groups such as this at the time appeared to embody the pristine New Pop ethos, it is clear that some music journalists, noting that what they had attempted to codify as the New Pop ethos was elsewhere being subverted, were looking to make use of their discursive power to move the pop agenda forward again.

Retrospective Discourse

Aesthetics

Having examined discursive accounts of New Pop from around the time of its existence as a cultural phenomenon, the analysis will now turn its attention to subsequent accounts; writing that attempts retrospectively to represent and make sense of New Pop, whether in terms of art, political sensibilities, or philosophical issues.

In looking firstly at the retrospective discourse on the aesthetics of New Pop, a major theme appears to emerge, concerning the connection between the sounds and themes of New Pop records and the sociopolitical context from which they emerged – a belief that, at this time, art and society existed in a symbiotic relationship, in some ways reflective of the social, in others constructive. A 2009 article sees Michael Hann describe the music of Spandau Ballet as ‘The Sound of Thatcherism’, citing, the ‘sexless funk of Chant No.1’, the ‘oddly fascistic undertones of Musclebound’, and the ‘dreadful wine-bar soul of True’ (*The Guardian*, Mar 25). Although the implication appears to be that Spandau’s music tapped into and embodied some kind of socio-political zeitgeist, it is also apparent in this appraisal that in retrospective terms the music itself has also become constitutive, as well as a resonant reminder, of what the political culture signified. In examining the data, it also become clear that the most commonly presented ‘decline narrative’, of what eventually ‘became’ of New Pop, centres on the notion that its purported aesthetic decline was closely related to political events. 1983 is posited as the year when New Pop ‘went wrong’; as Stanley (2009) puts it, ‘after the post-punk pop delights of OMD, ABC, and the Teardrop Explodes’, the dominant strand of New Pop became the ‘pliable and predictable’ Paul Young, Wham! and Howard Jones. This shift, he asserts, was due to a general malaise on

the part of the record-buying public in a time of social unrest – ‘it was almost as if the country was tired of mavericks, had heard enough about unemployment figures and ghost towns and nuclear threat. They wanted glamour, in a Seaside Special way’ (*The Guardian*, Mar 07 2009). Within the retrospective writings which claim an art-society relation, we also see a theory emerge in which a connection is made between the putative ‘end’ of New Pop and the second term election of Margaret Thatcher, with the pop of Thatcher’s first term functioning as radical commentary, and its equivalent during her second term becoming the sonic representative of jaded capitulation to the ‘system’ – ‘the soundtrack to affluent complacency’ (Reynolds 2009, p.294). Recent writings have also suggested echoes of the New Pop art/society mirror in the popular music of 2009, making the connection between the current economic downturn and the purported contemporary return to ‘pure pop’- ‘it’s amazing what a financial crisis can do for the state of the charts’, writes Ciaran Gaynor (para. 2 , 2009).

Having looked at representations of the New Pop aesthetic in the press, the attention will now turn to critical discussion of it within academia. A theme that dominates in retrospective academic appraisals of the New Pop era concerns its relationship to the politics of art (Redhead 1990). New Pop is identified here as an important moment in the history of popular music, as the point at which the modalities of aesthetic authenticity shifted and were reconceptualised. Attention is drawn to the fact that not only did the ‘proudly and cagily synthetic and plastic’ pop (Redhead 1990, p. 12) of the early ‘80s represent an implicit rejection of what it saw as the clichéd sensibilities of rock music (the organic and the spontaneous), it also marked a shift in the terms of aesthetic judgment in popular music writing - ‘pop’, having been seen as the artistically impoverished kid brother of ‘rock’ was now re-conceptualised as ‘sharp’ and ‘clever’. In academic discussion of New Pop, there is a desire to more widely contextualise the period in question, and as such

it is presented as a part of an unfolding narrative of western popular music. Although, as with most narratives, there is an inherent sense of inevitability in terms of the ordering of events, it is, unlike the often openly subjective and value-laden narratives constructed by music journalists, presented as a neutral account. The relative aesthetic merits of 'pop', 'rock' or otherwise are not discussed.

Politics

Turning now to broadly political themes, in examining the data it seems clear that retrospective accounts of the political ethos of New Pop are fairly disparate, and often rather contradictory. On one hand, a popular representation of the New Pop phenomenon suggests that it was essentially apolitical and escapist, as in the claim that 'New Pop liked to pretend that the world outside didn't exist' (Savage 1995, p.535). On the other hand, the already explored notion of a symbiosis of art and society in retrospective accounts suggests that New Pop was the perfect soundtrack to the excesses of the 1980s; that in fact its apparent espousal of hedonism was perfectly in tune with the sociopolitical culture of the period (Hann 2009). Moreover, this representation of the politics of the New Pop era is further complicated by the retrospective notion that its insistence on privileging pleasure over politics - contained in the early '80s motto, 'Dance, don't riot' - was in fact in itself a political gesture, a radical reaction to contemporary social unrest (Reynolds 2005).

In contrast with retrospective accounts that posit New Pop either as apolitical or as perfect pop for the Thatcher era, the data reveals another theme present in recent discourse on the period's political outlook. These representations focus on a latent or encoded radicalism in New Pop, and draw on what has to come to be known as the 'conform to deform' discourse, of infiltrating the mainstream in order to surreptitiously disseminate

radical ideas. Simon Reynolds, who at present is the principle chronicler of the post-punk period, writes of the seemingly innocuous pop of Heaven 17, and looks to ascribe to their records a post-punk-style radicalism – ‘If the group saw music as ‘just entertainment’, they equally seemed unable to refrain from slyly slipping some *Entertainment*-like subversion into their glossily-surfaced pop’ (Reynolds 2005, p. 372). In terms of identifying a possible discursive strategy at work here, it could be suggested that in alluding to rather than directly referencing the group Gang of Four (*Entertainment* being their 1979 album), the writer is not only making an implicit assumption about the reader’s background knowledge, but in a way also ‘naturalising’ the notion that New Pop was the direct inheritor of the post-punk political ethos. In the data, this particular strand of thought appears to be frequently accompanied by another ‘betrayal narrative’, in which the story goes that the punk ethic-informed ‘original’ New Pop was eventually subsumed by a vacuous, apolitical version – ‘what BEF had parodied with a knowing socialist wink, The Thompson Twins became for real’ (Reynolds 2005, p. 411). In this version of events, then, the putative demise of New Pop is connected to a death of irony in pop, and a rise in naked commercial ambition; that somewhere within the sending-up of consumerist values in early New Pop, an invisible line was crossed into from critical imitation into unconscious embodiment. In the following quote, what is asserted to have been the ambiguity of pop politics at this time is highlighted: ‘it’s a small step from entryism to conspicuous consumption, from Scritti Politti to the Thompson Twins, from Glenn Gregory to Gordon Gecko’ (Harvell 2005). The discursive rhetoric employed here perhaps highlights the sense in which past decades of popular music are often viewed through a cultural prism, and sense retrospectively made of their events by resorting to hyperbolic imagery and shared cultural understandings. It also reminds us of Van Dijk’s (2004) assertion that cultural memory is mediated and the past often partly constructed by available public versions of history (in

this case media representations of the 1980s as the apogee of greed and materialism, such as the film *Wall Street*)

Philosophy

The analysis will now turn its attention from recent representations of the politics of New Pop to those of its philosophical foundations, whether in terms of its specific outlook or more broadly its relation to the philosophical condition of popular culture at that point.

In looking at retrospective discursive representations of the general sensibility of New Pop texts, a major theme emerges; that of pop as deconstruction. New Pop is characterised variously as 'knowing' and ironic, self-referential and playful; in short, it is ascribed many of the supposed qualities of the much-discussed 'postmodern condition'. That which Reynolds terms the 'meta-pop' of the New Pop era is seen here, in retrospective accounts, to have inaugurated a subsequent tendency for popular music to critically examine itself within its texts, to interrogate the ideological assumptions of the aesthetic through its art, and to appropriate, recycle and sometimes subvert the signifiers of pop. For example, in an account of the recent comeback tour of the New Pop act ABC, their best-selling album *The Lexicon of Love* is positioned as the 'apotheosis of knowing, high-concept "new pop"' (*The Guardian*, 10 Apr 2009). Similarly, Reynolds, in writing about the B.E.F. album, *Music of Quality and Distinction* (on which contemporary artists covered pop classics in mostly, but not exclusively, arch fashion), describes it as 'a seminal exercise in postmodern pop' (Reynolds 2005, p.376). It might be suggested that this kind of retrospective sense-making of pop history runs the risk of erroneously ascribing particular motives to artistes and bestowing particular significances on art works. The problem of retrospectively imputing this is highlighted in an interview conducted by

Reynolds with the Orange Juice frontman Edwyn Collins. Reynolds suggests, ‘so the group’s image was pieced together, postmodern style, just like the music?’ – to which Collins replies, ‘not really, it wasn’t that self-conscious’ (Reynolds 2009, p. 312). Of course, it may be the case here that the artiste has a vested interest in maintaining his status as romantic *auteur*, rather than postmodern *bricoleur*; however, in looking at the construction of cultural histories, the issue of retrospectively deciphering intent is perhaps a salient one

The data also points to an inclination to view New Pop variously as the cause, symptom or outcome of a specific ‘moment’ in the history of British popular music. Some accounts hold that it coincided with (or was responsible for – it is not always clear) for a halting of the linear narrative of pop – ‘this was the moment when pop culture went fully postmodern: when youth culture time became serial rather than linear’ (Savage 1995, p. 535). Elsewhere the emphasis is on characterising the transition from ‘post-punk’ to New Pop as a shift from modernism to postmodernism in popular music, and the attendant implication seems to be that the shock of punk gave way to a decline of pop metanarratives (Reynolds 2005; 2009; Redhead 1990). There is generally a tendency here for viewing and representing popular music as a cultural continuum, an ongoing history in which its seemingly discrete parts are part of a larger narrative. The sense of cause-and-effect is resonant here, with, as Richardson (1990, p. 118) suggests, the significance of each event ‘produced by its temporal position and its role in a comprehensible whole’

Finally, we turn to an examination of the ways in which the collective New Pop ‘vision’ – the sense in which it both tapped into and created a cultural ‘moment’ in the ‘80s - has been conceptualised in retrospect. An examination of recent accounts of New Pop reveals a disparity in perception on this theme. On one hand we see a characterisation of New Pop as encapsulating the worst excesses of the decade, a tendency towards both

superficiality and conservatism - or as Tom Ewing of online pop journal *Freaky Trigger* puts it, 'the sheer ghastly pigheaded selfish crazed uselessness of 80-89' (Ewing 2001). The portrayal of New Pop here is as an integral element of the purported '80s emphasis on 'style over substance'; embodied for some, perhaps, in the slick graphic design of Neville Brody, and in terms of pop music in the 'concern with preening and individual self-image' on the part of groups such as Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran (Taylor, quoted in Redhead 1990, p.33).

On the other hand, the data also reveals a fond remembrance of the New Pop era as vital, radical, and forward-thinking; a time in which it seemed that anything was possible in art. There is a sense here of viewing the period 1980-84 as not only a golden age in British popular music, but also a Utopian moment in youth culture more generally, when the cultural landscape seemed boundless (Reynolds 2005; Harvell 2005). Artist Stuart Semple (as he tells us, 'born in 1980') writes of the present day need to evoke the spirit of early '80s pop; a powerful moment for avant-garde ideas, he argues, before the 'bland branded times' ushered in by a near-total corporatisation of pop culture (*The Guardian*, 11 Oct 2007). As a result of this purported shift, for Harvell, the "pop of ideas" of the early '80s is now 'never likely to repeat itself'. In these recent accounts, New Pop is positioned as representative of a supposed last-gasp of artistic freedom in the pop sphere before manufactured pop became dominant once again – in stark opposition to those that posit it as the facile aesthetic outgrowth of an cultural obsession with image over content. In examining positive accounts of the popular culture of the past, the issue of nostalgia in the construction of cultural history is brought to mind. As Jameson (1991, p. 281) has suggested, such accounts may in fact be seen not only as favourable, but also perhaps rather idealised, with the less romantic aspects of experience effectively excluded.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this analysis of the discursive representations of 'New Pop', we have looked both at constructions of a popular cultural phenomenon from around the time of its emergence, and representations of a cultural moment some time after the event. The aim here was to illuminate the issues pointed to in the background literature. Broadly, these encompassed: i) the act of narrativisation in the representation of cultural phenomena; ii) the extent to which the cultural context in which social actors are embedded can determine their available discursive repertoire; and iii) the ways in which the social character of memory can influence the construction of cultural histories. The title of the dissertation makes reference to the problem of 'unravelling cultural histories'; the word 'unravelling' here can perhaps be taken as having a double-meaning. On one hand, the act of unravelling can be seen as deciphering or unpicking the tangled web of discursive accounts, as is the aim in much analytical work; on the other hand we might suggest that, as a result of some of the issues highlighted in the literature, unravelling may also connote the 'undoing' or 'coming apart' of a coherent cultural history. Identifying disparity between chronologically distanced accounts of the same phenomenon arguably highlights these potential problems.

As a general comparison, it would appear that discursive representations of New Pop from the time of its emergence tend to be centred on the artistes, music, and music business itself, whereas retrospective discourse appears to be more concerned with placing the music into some form of socio-cultural context and connecting it to broader issues of lifestyle and philosophy. Quite apart from the obvious point about an emphasis on the music itself at the time of its emergence being inevitable (in terms of interviews with artistes and record reviews), we might suggest here that this discrepancy is also in part indicative of a shift in discursive power. Artistes themselves may have more of a voice in

representations at the time of a cultural phenomenon of which they are a constituent part; later on, the authority to indulge in retrospective sense-making may belong to the cultural arbiters of the day.

A further general point would concern the issue of how, when and why a particular cultural 'moment' comes to be defined. Were writers such as Paul Morley sensing a moment in British popular music and responding to it in their work, or is the case that in consciously shifting music press discourse in a specific direction they were in a sense partly instrumental in constructing the New Pop phenomenon? Here the data suggests that many of the themes found early on, which were to gradually become associated with New Pop, were 'in the air' generally in music press discourse (e.g. the 'return to pop', the ambition of post-punk pop groups). We see these themes codified as 'New Pop' as such by journalists later on as a specific 'moment' begins to cohere or gather momentum. Interestingly, in looking at the data it becomes clear that 'New Pop' as a term is not one that was universally referred to in the music press in the period 1980-83; it was, in the main, used by Paul Morley and his cohorts at the *NME*, and later on occasionally alluded to (often sarcastically) by rival music paper, *Melody Maker*. In the teen-marketed magazine *Smash Hits*, in the years 1980-83, the term 'New Pop' does not appear at all. In contrast, retrospective accounts of the era seem to offer a representation of the New Pop phenomenon as one which had been fully-formed and defined unproblematically at the time, and perhaps looks to position New Pop as a pop cultural 'watershed' after punk. This tendency to envision history as a series of discrete periods (in this case the artificial ordering of pop music 'epochs') is, as Zerubavel (2003) argues, an inevitable element of retrospective sense-making. It is also pointed out here that the construction of the past is tacitly accomplished through language. However, the use of the term 'New Pop', with all that it connotes in merely two words, not only serves to establish it as a watershed moment

in retrospective accounts, but also at the time provided a discursive emblem of what was at stake in popular music.

The data reveals a tendency, not only in retrospective accounts but also in those produced at the time of the New Pop 'moment', to theorise the history of popular music in teleological terms, as a linear unfolding with an inherent purpose. In accounts at the time it is manifested in the sense, conveyed by both artistes and critics, that New Pop was 'moving on' from punk, and looking to achieve in the areas in which its predecessor had ostensibly failed. This sense of pop history as an evolution or straightforward march to progress is even more acute in many of the retrospective 'storied' accounts of New Pop; a condensed account of the period sums this up with the short phrase, 'post-punk then gave way to new pop' (Empire, *The Observer*, Apr 17 2005), as if the popular music baton had been passed from one movement to another in uncomplicated fashion.

As the background literature demonstrates, the concept of 'emplotment' (Ricoeur 1984) is key here in the construction of cultural histories, with a sense of causation and effect crucial in presenting them as coherent and resonant accounts. However, not only must narratives be internally meaningful, they must also adhere to the 'intelligibility norms' of the culture in which they produced (Lawler 2008). There is, then, a sense in which any disparity between representations of New Pop from the time and more recent accounts can be partly attributed to this fact. We might suggest that the narratives constructed at the time - whether it is the 'betrayal narrative' which saw New Pop as a 'sell-out' of punk principles, or the 'complete control' narrative of not repeating the mistakes of punk - were in a sense engaging with and formed part of a wider historical dialogue in popular music, one which would have been highly resonant in that moment. Likewise, the 'decline narrative', concerned with asking 'where did it all go wrong?' and

interrogating the role of the market in the cultural sphere – one which forms a significant part of retrospective accounts of New Pop - is perhaps an issue which speaks powerfully to a contemporary preoccupation with the future of popular music itself.

More pragmatically perhaps, we might surmise that many of the narratives presented at the time of New Pop were strategically constructed by music journalists, in order not only to succeed in their professional role of filling fifty-two front covers a year, but also to fulfil their *raison d'être* as cultural arbiters and scene-makers in terms of moving music forward, and to be seen as having been involved in doing so. As Toynbee (1993, p. 297) has pointed out, the role of the music press involves, on the one hand, 'nurturing the new', and on the other, 'killing off the old'. In particular, the data suggests that the emphasis on 'change', which forms a significant theme in the data from the time of New Pop, could be construed as part of an agenda pressed by some sections of the pop music media in order to move music forward, which was perhaps discursively decorated as an aesthetic or philosophical concern. In terms of the examined articles and interviews from the period 1980-83, the analysis shows that punk was alluded to sporadically, but this, in the main, remains an implicit and unspoken reference, a conspiracy of silence almost, on the part of artistes and critics, in order that pop music may find its feet again and move forward. Retrospective chroniclers of the period, it might be suggested, have no such stake in a disavowal of the connection between punk and its 'successor', New Pop; recently produced accounts, in fact, deliberately position the latter as the inevitable outcome of the former, and a direct inheritor of its ethos. There may also be a sense in which the cultural hindsight afforded to writings produced decades later allows for a fuller contextualised account to be constructed of the whole period in question. We might remind ourselves at this point that the punk era itself has been appraised, re-appraised, and codified in the course of the last thirty years, and therefore, New Pop's relation to it in

discursive representation will perhaps have shifted accordingly.

The study also examined the idea that each sociocultural context has a particular 'store' of discursive expression and cultural understandings from which we must draw in order to communicate meaning at any given time. An aim of the present study, of representations of the same phenomenon in different time periods, must therefore be not only to establish what *has* been said in the respective periods, but also to indicate what perhaps *can* and *can't* be said in particular periods? Firstly, however, it should be pointed out that the data demonstrates that there are several examples of discursive differences *within* time periods, across different types of media. An obvious example of this is the way in which, within writings around the time of New Pop, the rationale constructed for the 'return to pop' was of a populist hue in the teen-oriented magazine *Smash Hits*, while in the so-called 'heavyweight' music papers such as the *NME*, it is revealed as almost Utopian.

In terms of comparison between accounts of New Pop across successive periods, the data reinforces the proposed difference in available 'interpretative resources' (Edley 2008) and consequent disparity in discursive representations. Accounts of New Pop from around the time of its emergence appear to be in some ways determined by the recent 'trauma' of punk. For example, the deliberate nonchalance shown at this point by artistes and critics towards what had once been a pop music preoccupation – the politics of the relationship between art and commerce – is perhaps a direct result of the previous attempt by punk to expose and demystify it. Similarly, in the period of the early 1980s the pre-punk obsession with 'authenticity' in pop music discourse is, it seems, temporarily consigned to the scrapheap of cultural history. Clearly, these are discourses which for historical reasons resonant at this particular time, are absent from the common discursive currency of popular

music criticism of the period.

Recent accounts of New Pop, the data suggests, invoke a different set of discourses, and are couched in rather distinct terms. The 'conform to deform' discourse – the notion that New Pop was somehow channelling the spirit of punk and represented a radical challenge to the pop system from within – has been prevalent in 'serious' contemporary music criticism. We might suggest that this is a discourse which would not have been particularly meaningful at the time of the phenomenon itself; in fact, the data indicates that this was indeed the case, and that certainly on the part of artistes the emphasis in terms of discussion of entering the mainstream was on artistic and economic freedom rather than radical subversion. In applying Critical Discourse Analysis to representations of New Pop, we might here want to interrogate some of the tangible outcomes of discursive sense-making for the wider population. There may be a sense here in which the kinds of critical reappraisal and retrospective intellectualising of pop phenomena seen above can not only serve to effectively skew history, but also more importantly, we might suggest, serve to disenfranchise the experience of those for whom it was 'merely' joyful and uncomplicated pop music, and for some, the 'soundtrack of their lives' at that point. Is this perhaps an 'order of discourse' (Fairclough 1995) designed to exclude or silence alternative voices – one which draws on interpretative resources which are not universally available?

A further intention of the study was to illuminate the issues surrounding collective memory, and its possible effects in constructions of cultural history. Clearly we are concerned here with the second set of collected data, containing retrospective accounts of the New Pop era. As we have seen, there is a tendency here to view popular music 'movements' as part of a larger sociocultural picture, and to connect them to a particular zeitgeist. This is especially true of accounts in which popular culture and politics are said

to be symbiotically linked, and, as with the narrativising of history, we may see these representations as indicative of the need to neatly package cultural history into vivid and coherent chapters. Some of the data exemplifies this nicely, especially that which posits the 'original' and 'authentic' New Pop as existing in tension with Thatcher's first term in government, and the putatively ersatz and apolitical later-period version as functioning as *de facto* cheerleader for her second term. Ideas of this nature are partly a result of the ability of retrospective chroniclers to view pop music history as a part a wider cultural continuum; the implications for constructing cultural histories might include a tendency towards chronological reductionism and an under-theorisation of the link between art and society.

As has been suggested, cultural memory and popular representation exist in a dialectical relationship, serving to construct and inform one another (Lipsitz 1990; Van Dijk 2004). Shared 'remembrances' of the popular culture of the past are, it is argued, partly constructed and perpetuated over time by consumption of mediated texts, eventually passing into the collective cultural memory. In several retrospective accounts of New Pop, there is a prevailing sense in which they have been either constructed by or refracted through various cultural texts offering perhaps codified and oversimplistic representations of the era. For example, the already mentioned account of the period by cultural commentator Peter York, of early '80s pop as inextricably linked with a prevailing hedonistic style culture, arguably continues to be influential in many subsequent representations of the decade. Moreover, in appealing to the idea of an often unspecified 'feeling' in order to make sense of history, the spectre of nostalgia is perhaps invoked; the epistemological implications of this in the construction of cultural histories have been explored. This notion of 'affect' is perhaps pertinent to the present study in ways that cannot be adequately quantified here for reasons of space and methodological scope; it

might in a future study be fruitfully explored by means of ethnographic work, perhaps involving the triangulation of participant data and textual analysis.

Finally, it should perhaps be pointed out that in examining retrospective accounts generally, it becomes clear that the New Pop phenomenon has in many ways come to represent the early 1980s in terms of British music in the collective cultural imaginary, the result perhaps being that many genres of popular music from this time - Reggae, Ska, Soul, Jazz-Funk, Heavy Metal - are excluded and in effect written out of pop history? It might be pertinent to ask, or to at some future point investigate, how and why this might be the case.

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Appendix

Glossary of terms

Punk

Although use of the term 'punk' in reference to music can be traced back to U.S. journalism of the late 1960s/early 1970s, in this dissertation the term refers to the British music and style movement initiated in 1976 by the Sex Pistols. Punk espoused a do-it-yourself ethic in the making of popular music, articulated anti-establishment beliefs, and defined itself against the musical mainstream.

Second Wave Punk

A term often applied at the time to groups formed in the immediate wake of the Sex Pistols.

Post-Punk

A highly contested term. It has been argued that John Lydon's post-Sex Pistols group, Public Image Limited, inaugurated post-punk, as while it owed its existence to punk, it self-consciously separated itself from the previous movement (a similar case has been made for Howard Devoto's post-Buzzcocks band, Magazine). In recent years, the term post-punk has come to represent a style or sub-genre of music (typically involving a brittle guitar sound, sparse arrangement, and oblique lyrical content), one which has been revived by a new generation of bands. Often used interchangeably with the term 'New Wave', which in effect was a marketing category introduced by U.S. record companies, designed to remove the threatening connotations of 'punk' in order to ensure sales.

Progressive Rock

Emerging from the psychedelic rock of the late 1960s, Progressive Rock attempted to transcend the format and structure of Anglo-American popular music.

Emphasis was placed here on technical ability, musical prowess, and complex musical arrangement, and the Punk movement of the late 1970s looked to define itself against this.

Power Pop

A sub-genre drawing on 1960s mod influences which emerged around the punk era, Power Pop was upbeat and energetic, and although it was closely allied with punk in its return to a pre-Progressive pop style, it did not employ the latter's shock tactics or share its political leanings, and has therefore been seen as a less threatening version of punk.

Post-Punk Pop

A term employed for the purposes of this dissertation to denote chart music produced in the 'aftermath' of punk, used interchangeably here with the term 'New Pop' (the phenomenon in question in the study).

New Romantic

Primarily a fashion subculture emphasising androgynous glamour, which was centred on London's Blitz Club, New Romantic as a term came to represent David Bowie-influenced, post-punk British pop groups of the early 1980s such as Spandau Ballet, Duran Duran and Culture Club. Such groups are also associated with 'New Pop', and the two terms are often used interchangeably.

